

President's Inaugural Address.

Fellow Citizens of the United States:

In compliance with a custom as old as the Government itself, I appear before you to address you briefly, and to take in your presence the oath prescribed by the Constitution of the United States to be taken by the President before he enters on the duties of his office. I do not consider it necessary at present for me to express myself on those matters of administration about which there is no special anxiety or excitement.

The apprehension seems to exist among the people of the Southern States that by the accession of a Republican administration their property and their personal security are to be endangered. There has never been any reasonable cause for such apprehensions; indeed the most ample evidence to the contrary has all the while been extended and open to their inspection. It is found in nearly all the published speeches of him who now addresses you.

I now quote from one of those speeches, when I declared that I have no purpose, directly or indirectly, to interfere with the institution of slavery in the States where it exists, and believe I have no lawful right to do so, and I have no inclination to do so. Those who nominated and elected me did so with the full knowledge that I had made this and many similar declarations, and had never recanted them. And even more than this they placed on the platform, for my acceptance, as a law to themselves and to me, the clear and emphatic resolution which I now read: "Resolved, That the maintenance inviolate of the rights of the State and especially the right of each State to order and control its own domestic institutions, according to its own judgment exclusively, is essential to the balance of power, on which the perfection and endurance of our political fabric depends, and we denounce the lawless invasion by an armed force of the Government, of any State or Territory—no matter under what pretext—as among the greatest of crimes."

I now reiterate those sentiments. In doing so I only press upon the public attention the most conclusive evidence, of which the case is susceptible, that the property, peace and security of no section are to be in any wise endangered by the new Administration. I add to it that all the protection which consistently with the constitution and laws can be given, all the States, when lawfully demanded, for whatever cause, as cheerfully to one section as to another, shall be given.

There is much controversy about the delivery of fugitives from service or labor. The clause in our new constitution is as plainly written in the Constitution as any one of its provisions: "No person held to service or labor in one State under the laws thereof, escaping into another, shall, in consequence of any law or regulation therein, be discharged from such service or labor; but shall be delivered up, on claim, to the party to whom such service or labor may be due."

It is scarcely questioned that this provision was intended, by those who made it, for the reclaiming of what we call fugitive slaves, and the intention of the lawgivers is the law. All Members of Congress swear their support to the whole Constitution—to this provision as much as any other. To the proposition then that slaves, whose cases come within the terms of this clause, shall be delivered up, their oaths are unanimous. Now if they would make the effort, in good temper, could they not with nearly perfect equality make and pass a law by means of which to keep good that unanimous oath? There is some difference of opinion whether this clause should be enforced by National or State authority; but surely that difference is not a very material one. If the slave is to be surrendered, it can be of but little consequence to him or to others, by which authority it is done, and should any one, in any case, be content that his oath shall be kept, he can be content that his oath shall be kept on a merely unsubstantial controversy as to how it shall be kept. Again in any law upon this subject ought not all the safeguards of liberty known in civilized and humane Jurisprudence to be introduced so that a freeman may not, in any case, be surrendered as a slave, and might it not be well, at the same time, to provide by law for the enforcement of that clause, in the constitution which guarantees that the citizens of each State shall be entitled to all the privileges and immunities of citizens in the several States?

I take the official oath, today, with no mental reservation, and with no purpose to construe the Constitution and laws by any hypocritical rules, and while I do not choose now to specify particular acts of Congress as proper to be enforced, I do suggest that it will be much safer for all, both in official and private stations, to conform to, and abide by, all these acts which stand unrepented, than to violate any of them, trusting to find impunity in having them held to be unconstitutional.

It is seventy-two years since the first inauguration of a President under our National Constitution. During that period, fifteen different and greatly distinguished citizens have, in succession, administered the Executive branch of the Government. They have conducted it through many perils, and generally with great success. Yet with all this scope for precedent, I now enter upon the same task, for the brief constitutional term of four years, under great and peculiar difficulty.

The disruption of the Federal Union, heretofore only menaced, is now actually attempted. I hold that, in contemplation of universal acceptance and the Constitution, the Union of States is perpetual. Perpetuity is implied, if not expressed, in the fundamental law of all national governments. It is safe to assert that the Government proper, never had a provision in its organic law for its own termination. Continue to execute all the express provisions of our national constitution and the Union will endure forever, it being impossible to destroy it except by some action not provided for in the instrument itself.

Again, if the United States be not a Government proper, but an association of States, in the nature of a contract merely, can it be a contract be peaceably unmade, unless by all the parties who made it? One party to a contract may violate it—break it—so to speak; but does it not require all to rescind it? Descending from these general principles, we find the proposition, that in legal contemplation, the Union is perpetual, confirmed by the history of the Union itself. The Union is much older than the Constitution. It was formed in fact by the articles of association in 1774. It was matured and continued by the Declaration of Independence in 1776. It was further matured on the faith of all the thirteen States, expressly pledged and engaged that it should be perpetual by the articles of confederation in 1778, and finally in 1787.

One of the declared objects for ordaining and establishing the Constitution, was to form a more perfect Union. If secession by one or by a part, only, of the States, be lawfully possible, the Union is less than before the Constitution having lost the vital element of perpetuity. It follows from these views that no State upon its own mere motion can lawfully get out of the Union; that resolves and ordinances to that effect are legally void, and that acts of violence within any State or States against the authority of the United States, are insurrectionary or revolutionary, according to circumstances. I therefore consider that in view of the Constitution and laws the Union is unbroken, and to the extent of my ability, I shall take care, as the Constitution itself expressly enjoins on me, that the laws of the Union be faithfully executed in all the States.

In doing this I deem it a simple duty on my part and I shall perform it, so far as practicable, under my rightful masters the American people shall withhold the requisite means, or in some authoritative manner, direct to the contrary. I trust this will not be regarded as a menace but only as the declared purpose of the Union that it will constitutionally defend and maintain itself.

In doing this there need be no blood shed or violence, and there shall be none unless it be forced upon the National authority. The power conferred to me will be used to hold, occupy, and possess the property and places belonging to the Government; to collect duties and imports, and beyond what may be necessary for these objects there will be no using of force, against or among the people anywhere. Where hostility to the United States in any individual locality should be so great and so universal as to prevent competent resident citizens from holding Federal offices, there will be no attempt to force obnoxious strangers among the people for that object. While the strict legal right may exist, in the Government, to enforce the exercise of these offices, the attempt to do so would be so irritating and so nearly impracticable, withal, that I deem it better to forego, for a time, the uses of such offices. The mails unless repelled will continue to be furnished in all points of the Union.

So far as possible the people, everywhere, shall have that sense of perfect security which will be most favorable to calm thoughts and reflection. The course here indicated will be followed unless current events and experience shall show a modification, or change, to be proper, and in every case and exigency, my best discretion will be exercised according to the circumstances actually existing and with a view and a hope of a peaceable solution of the national troubles, and the restoration of the fraternal sympathies and affections. That there are persons in one section or another who seek to destroy the Union, at all events, and are glad of any pretext to do it, I will neither affirm nor deny. But if there be such I need address no words to them. To those however, who really love the Union, may I speak.

Before entering upon so grave a matter as the destruction of our national fabric, with all its benefits, its memories and hopes, would it not be wise to ascertain previously why we do so? Will you hazard so desperate a step while there is any possibility that any portion of the ills, you fly from, have no real existence? Will you, while the certain ills you fly from are greater than all the real ones you fly from? Will you risk the commission of so fearful a mistake? All profess to be content in the Union, if all Constitutional rights can be maintained. Is it true, then, that any right, plainly written in the Constitution has been denied? I think not. Happily the human mind is so constituted that no party can at the same time, and with a good conscience, be guilty of doing wrong to a single citizen, or to a single State, and at the same time, profess to be content in the Union, if all Constitutional rights can be maintained. Is it true, then, that any right, plainly written in the Constitution has been denied? I think not. Happily the human mind is so constituted that no party can at the same time, and with a good conscience, be guilty of doing wrong to a single citizen, or to a single State, and at the same time, profess to be content in the Union, if all Constitutional rights can be maintained.

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ence on the one side or the other. If a minority in such a case will secede rather than acquiesce, they make a precedent which in time will divide and ruin them; for a minority of their own will secede from them, whenever a majority refuses to be controlled by such a minority. For instance, why may not any portion of a new Confederacy a year or two hence arbitrarily secede again, precisely as portions of the present Union now claim to secede from it?

All who cherish disunion sentiments are now being educated to the exact temper of doing this. Is there such a perfect identity of interests among the States to compose a new Union as to produce harmony only, and prevent a renewed secession? Plainly, the central idea of secession is the essence of anarchy. A majority held in restraint by Constitutional checks and limitations, and always changing easily with the deliberate changes of popular opinions and sentiments, is the only true sovereign of a free people. Whoever rejects it, dares, of necessity, fly to anarchy. It is impossible. The rule of a minority as a permanent arrangement is wholly inadvisable, so that rejecting the majority principle, anarchy and despotism in some form is all that is left.

I do not forget the position assumed by some that constitutional questions are to be decided by the Supreme Court, nor do I deny that such decisions must be binding in any case upon the parties to a suit as to the object of that suit. While they are also entitled to very high respect and consideration in all parallel cases, by all other departments of the government, and while it is obviously possible that such a decision may be erroneous in any given case, still the evil effect following it, being limited to that particular case, with the chance that it may be overruled and never become a precedent for other cases, can better be borne than could the evils of a different practice. At the same time the candid citizen must confess that if the policy of the government upon vital questions affecting the whole people is to be irrevocably fixed by a decision of the Supreme Court, the instant they are made, as in ordinary litigation between parties in personal actions, the people will have ceased to be their own rulers, having to that extent practically resigned their government into the hands of that tribunal. Nor is there in this view, any assault upon the Court or the Judges. It is a duty, from which they may not shrink, to decide cases properly brought before them and it is no fault of theirs if others seek to turn their decisions into political purposes. One section of our country believes slavery is right and ought to be extended while the other believes it is wrong, and ought not to be extended.

This is the only substantial dispute; for the fugitive slave clause of the Constitution, and the laws for the suppression of the foreign slave trade, are each as well enforced perhaps as any law can ever be in a community where the moral sense of the people imperfectly supports the law itself. The great body of the people abide by the dry legal obligations in both cases. After the separation of the sections, therefore, the foreign slave trade, now imperfectly suppressed, would be ultimately revived, without restrictions in one section, while the fugitive slaves, now only partially surrendered, would not be surrendered at all, by the other. Physically speaking, we cannot separate, and cannot remove our respective sections from each other nor build an impassable wall between them. The husband and wife may be divorced and go out of the presence and beyond the reach of each other, but the different parts of our country cannot do this. They cannot but remain face to face and an intercourse either amicable or hostile, must continue between them. Is it possible to make that intercourse more advantageous or more satisfactory after separating than before? Can aliens make treaties easier than friends can make laws? Can treaties be more faithfully enforced between aliens than laws among friends?

Supposing you go to war, you cannot fight always, and when after much loss on both sides, and no gain on either, you cease fighting, the old identical question as to terms of intercourse are again upon you. This country, with its institutions, belongs to the people, who inhabit it. Whenever they shall grow weary of the existing Government, they can exercise their constitutional right of amending it, or their revolutionary right to dismember or overthrow it. I cannot be ignorant of the fact that many worthy and patriotic citizens are desirous of having the Constitution amended. While I make no recommendation of amendments, I fully recognize the rightful authority of the people over the whole subject, to be exercised in either of the modes prescribed in the instrument itself, and I should, under existing circumstances, favor, rather than oppose, a fair opportunity being offered the people to act upon it. I will venture to add that to me the Convention mode seems preferable, inasmuch as it allows the amendment to originate with the people themselves instead of only permitting them to take or reject a proposition originated by others, not especially chosen for the purpose, and which might not be precisely such as they would wish to accept or to refuse.

I understand a proposed amendment to the Constitution—which amendment, however, I have not seen—has passed Congress—to the effect that the Federal Government shall never interfere with the domestic institutions of the States, including that of persons held to service. To avoid a misconception of what I have said I depart from my purpose not to speak of particular amendments so far as to say, that holding such a provision to be now implied as constitutional law, I have no objection to its being made expressly and irrevocably so. The Chief Magistrate derives all his authority from the people and they have conferred none upon him to fix terms for the separation of the States. The people themselves can do this also if they choose, but the Executive, as such, has nothing to do with it. His duty is to administer, to preserve the Government as it is, and to transmit it to his successor. Why should he not be patient confidence in the justice of the people? Is there no equal hope in the world? Is there no difference, is either party with its friends, as being right in sight of the Ruler of Nations, with his eternal Truth and Justice on our side at the North or on yours at the South, or that Truth and Justice will surely prevail? By the judgment of this great tribunal the American people by the laws of the government under which we live, this same people, have wisely given their public servants but little power for mischief and have with equal wisdom provided for the return of that little to their hands, at short intervals. While the people maintain their virtue and vigilance—no administration by any extreme party, wickedness or folly can very seriously injure the government in the short space of years. My countrymen one and all, let us calmly and well upon this whole subject, nothing valuable can be lost by taking time. If there be an object to hurry and if you in hot haste to a step which you would never take deliberately, that object will be frustrated by taking time; but no good object can be frustrated by it. Such of you as are now dissatisfied, still have the old constitution unimpaired and in full force, the laws of your own framing under it.

While the new Administration will have no immediate power, if it would, to change either, if it were admitted that you who are dissatisfied stand on the right side, in the dispute, there still is no single good reason for precipitate action. Intelligence, patriotism, firm reliance on him who has never yet forsaken this favored land, are still competent to adjust, in the best way, all our present difficulties. In your hands, my dissatisfied countrymen, and not in mine, is the momentous issue of civil war. The Government will not assail you. You can have no conflict without being yourselves the aggressors. You have no oath, registered in Heaven, to destroy the Government, while I shall have the most solemn one to preserve, protect, and defend it.

Let us to close. We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained, it must not break our bonds of affection. The mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battle-field and patriot grave, to every living heart and hearth-stone, all over this broad land, will yet swell the chorus of the Union, when again touched, as surely as they will be the better angels of our nature.

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